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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SOFIA 000303

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TAGS: PGOV PREL MARR BU

SUBJECT: NEW BULGARIAN DEFENSE MINISTER STRESSES U.S. TIES  
AND DEFENSE REFORM

Classified By: Ambassador John Beyrle for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

**11. (C) Summary:** In his first meeting with Ambassador Beyrle, new Defense Minister Nikolai Tsonev affirmed the primacy of the bilateral relationship for Bulgaria, thanked the U.S. for its financial support of Bulgarian military modernization and expressed support for continued Bulgarian engagement in Iraq and Afghanistan. He expressed confidence that Bulgaria would continue its military operations in Iraq, despite the recent closure of the Ashraf Refugee Camp where the Bulgarian contingent has been stationed since 2006. He said the military was recommending options for additional deployments in Afghanistan and were ready to carry out whatever the ruling coalition approves. Tsonev mentioned his plans for military modernization and reform of the Ministry's procurement and land sale procedures, saying he intended to establish a new office to oversee the sale of MOD real estate. He also stressed the political importance of the construction and service contracts for the Joint Training Facilities and laid down a strong marker of the Bulgarian public's expectation that these contracts go to Bulgarian firms. End Summary.

#### FOCUS ON MODERNIZATION AND INTERNAL REFORM

**12. (C)** New Defense Minister Tsonev noted that his first meeting with the Diplomatic Corps was with the U.S. Ambassador. He stressed the importance of the bilateral relationship and laid out some of his priorities: 1) Modernization of Bulgarian Armed Forces in order to meet NATO requirements to the maximum extent possible; 2) Make military service an attractive career by improving quality of life and social status of service members; 3) Ensure that excellent work of Bulgarian soldiers overseas is understood by Bulgarian public; 4) Ensure that procurements and property sales are conducted with maximum transparency.

#### DEPLOYMENTS TO CONTINUE

**13. (C)** Tsonev did not directly answer Ambassador Beyrle's question on when Bulgaria's decision to send an additional 50 troops to take on the Entry Control Point mission at Kandahar Airfield would be made public. He said only that "he hoped a political decision would be made soon" and that the MOD would "adhere to whatever timetable was given to them by the Government." He added that he greatly appreciated US offers to provide training for Bulgarian contingents sent to Afghanistan and Iraq.

¶4. (C) Regarding Iraq, the new Defense Minister was aware that the Ashraf mission has effectively ended and said that "Bulgaria needs to continue involvement in Iraq." He mentioned that the MOD has come up with several options to present to the Council of Ministers. He did not elaborate on what these entailed or when a decision would be made, but noted that approval from Parliament would be required because the current mandate is very specific concerning the location in which the soldiers could serve. According to Tsonev, the GOB is aware of the short timelines involved and is taking expedited steps to get legal approval for extension of the mission in the shortest time possible.

#### HIGH EXPECTATIONS FOR LOCAL BENEFITS FROM JOINT BASES

¶5. (C) Tsonev was very concerned about the political fallout if Bulgarian firms did not win the construction and service contracts for the joint training facilities and mentioned the "high expectations" of local companies and residents multiple times. Ambassador Beyrle assured him that the Embassy and EUCOM fully understand Bulgarian concerns and described the many steps we have already taken so that Bulgarian firms are fully prepared for the competitive process.

#### MILITARY MODERNIZATION

¶6. (C) The Defense Minister noted that due to tight budgets, he was grateful for every dollar of U.S. assistance.

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He said he was ready to "start thinking outside the box" on ways to fund modernization projects and specifically mentioned his interest in using the sales of MOD land to finance reforms. The sale process will be based on a "marketing approach" and will be led by a new office he intends to have up and running by June 2008. He described five kinds of land transactions the office would handle: pure sales, property exchanges, sales of development rights, construction of new buildings and purchases of new buildings.

Any consultancy assistance from the United States would be most appreciated, he added.

¶7. (C) Ambassador Beyrle raised the issue of U.S.-funded upgrades to EKRAN, a new coastal surveillance system. Tsonev said he was disappointed the U.S. would provide only \$10 million vice \$20 million as originally projected. AMB explained that \$10 million was actually better for Bulgaria, because it would leave more FMF money for other modernization projects. Tsonev agreed with the need for the Navy to share information with all other relevant agencies (a requirement attached to the provision of U.S. funds). He understood the Navy has appeared reluctant to share information but believed they had not received sufficient information on the program. He said he would talk to them.

¶8. (C) Ambassador Beyrle mentioned that destruction of MANPADS was the highest USG small arms destruction priority and that if Bulgaria would be willing to add these weapons to its destruction list, U.S. funding for destruction could increase from \$300,000 to over \$1 million. Tsonev took note but did not respond.

¶9. (C) Comment: The new minister is growing into the job and stuck close to the script. Tsonev was a complete surprise as the choice of the junior coalition member, NMSS, to lead the Ministry of Defense. His previous assignment as Director of the MOD's Social Affairs Executive Agency was tainted by corruption allegations. His focus on MOD-internal issues and reference to the MOD following governmental decisions on overseas deployments implies that military issues of international significance will continue to be made by Prime Minister Stanishev and Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Kalfin. Tsonev is not considered a

heavyweight Minister even by members of his own party. He has room to grow. We'll help, but it will be a steep learning curve with only a year until elections for a new government. The departure of at least one talented and energetic Deputy Minister (Sonya Yankulova) and further senior management changes will lead to leadership and management challenges precisely as bilateral cooperation begins to ramp up with the start of construction on the Joint Facilities and increasingly ambitious joint training exercises. End Comment.

Beyrle